

Homily  
30 Ord C  
Oct. 27, 2019  
St. Bernard Church  
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## BEFORE WE PRAY

In last week's Gospel, we learned about the persistent widow, and how in our prayer life we need to be persistent. We were given the example of Saint Monica, who prayed for 20 years for the conversion of her wayward son. We know this son now as St. Augustine, one of the greatest saints in the history of the Church.

Today's Gospel is also about prayer. It's about the attitude we need to have when we begin to pray.

The Pharisee described in the Gospel is an achiever. His prayer can be paraphrased as follows: "Thank you, God, that I am such an awesome Jew. I'm ready for my trophy, right now."

His counterpart in the Gospel is a tax collector. He's greedy, dishonest, and hated by just about everyone. But Jesus tells us the tax collector is the hero in the story.

Why?

The tax collector seems like a total loser when it comes to doing religious things. But he has something we all need every time we start to pray.

The tax collector knows about mercy. He knows how totally undeserving he is of mercy. Yet, standing in the back of the temple, feeling completely out of place, he begs God to be merciful to him.

We don't know this, but there might have been moments in the mean, ugly life of this tax collector when, for some reason he might not even be able to explain, he forgave someone a debt, or gave someone money for food.

There might have been moments when, for some unknown reason, someone he owed money to gave him a break.

For whatever reason, the tax collector understands mercy. And from what he knows about the God of the Jews, this God is capable of that kind of mercy, and so he begs for it.

Before we pray, then, we have to admit deep in our hearts that we are totally dependent on God's mercy. If we think we have earned His mercy by our religious actions, we're in trouble.

In our modern society, we're all challenged to be achievers, producers, to be self-sufficient, to show the world what we can do, maybe even when it comes to religion.

What God wants from us when we begin to pray is for us to give up control, to abandon ourselves completely to Him, to trust Him and acknowledge our total dependence on Him. It's as if He wants us to realize every breath we take is a gift from Him.

There's an interesting statement about this in the First Chapter of the Gospel of John. John writes, "To those who did accept him (Jesus) he gave power to become children of God."

This is the paradox of our faith. It is in being like a child, acknowledging our dependence on God, that we have access to His power. To the extent we focus on our own power and control, God's power is withheld from us.

This is made clear in Chapter 12 of St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. Paul has been given a severe affliction. He begs God to relieve him of this pain. But God says to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul concludes this passage by saying, "Therefore, when I am weak, I am strong." Strong with God's strength, not his own.

So when we pray with an attitude of humility, of weakness, of surrendering completely to God and trusting in Him, it is then that we have access to His power. It is then that our prayers lead to something rich, beautiful and filled with grace.

Here are some basic questions which we can all ask ourselves.

Do we trust in the fatherhood of God? Are we willing to receive like a child all that He offers us?

Are we open to experiencing His personal, overflowing love for us?

Are we open to His creativity, to the meaning and purpose He has for each of our lives?

Are we willing to receive and to obey His truth, rather than invent our own?

Are we open to the challenges He wants to give us so that we mature in our relationship with Him?

Are we open to the discipline, tempered by His mercy, that He will administer to us when we disobey Him?

The answers to these questions will determine how ready we are when we begin to pray.